

BEAUTY'S SECRET

By ALAN MUIR

Author of "Vanity Hardware," "Golden Girls," Etc.

BOOK THREE.

LADY BEAUTY'S LOVERS

CHAPTER I.

THE LOVER SAYS "WELL YOU!" AND THE LADY SAYS "YES!"

One evening in February Rector Brent ap-pealed about five o'clock, just as the lamp was lighted in the drawing room. Luck had it in his bone that Sophia should be sitting there, and she rose to welcome her visitors who announced that her mother, and Silby were in the library and Car out for a walk. The little man, with praiseworthy readiness—perhaps he had got a hint before-hand—remarked that he would go to the library, as he wanted to speak with Mrs. Brent. She said the word hurriedly from the room, and left the parlor alone. Sophia glancing at Percival, noted that he carried a small parcel in his hand; and so, smiling himself alone with her, resolved to finish his broken story. He lost no time, having learned a lesson on that score already.

"I was interrupted the other day when I was telling you about Australia," he re-moved, drawing a chair close beside her. "So I think what I was saying?"

"The girl I am in love with so passionately, who got my heart out there—all this came up, and she was so grieved what would follow—"

"I thought you would. I brought it with me, and opened his pocket with trem-blings fingers. 'Only let me tell you this picture gives you a very faint idea of her in-deed. It is beautiful, but her actual face is past all beauty and all praise, soft as star-light, pure as snow, tender as the spring sun-shine, full of life and truth. Oh, how I longed to see her."

"She must be happy," Sophia said, with a smile which that whispered all he wanted to know, but the exiled young fellow did not mark it. "She must be very happy. Let me look at the picture."

"Almost with a sob she said it.

"I shall show it to you in a moment," he replied, holding it ready to turn up to the lamp-light; "only let me finish my story first. It was this—that I am to go to Australia again. I resolved when I saw the fact that he is here to live and die for me. His heavenly fairness attracted me for ever, and all my fear that the true face should not be seen, I had to wait a long time before I saw the real—many months. All that time I was true to my picture, and gazed at it morning, noon and night, till every feature was printed on my heart. Then the same came when I saw her. At the sight all memory of the picture vanished quite away. Oh, how I trembled lest she should be promised to any one else, lest she should not love me!"

"Yes?"

"There followed a tiny sigh. "And did she—did she—Oh, but she must!" Sophia said, turning her sad full eyes on his manly face. "I can finish the story; she said she would love you."

"The story is not finished yet," he cried, im-petuously. "But you are right in one thing: you can finish. Look, this is the picture of the girl I love."

She bent to look, and as she did so a tear she could not keep back dropped on the card-board. The girl's eyes filled with a cry and started to her feet. She had been here a moment. She looked at him, and such was the struggle of surprise, delight, modesty and fear for her face that he was now as far from the seat as he had been when he had been from his. His thoughts were angry.

"Miss Temple—Sophia," he said, "don't be angry! If I have offended you, I did not mean it. Surely you won't be angry?"

"She had no answer, but out looked stony for speech. Her eyes, however, followed him, and he, foolish fellow, gave her a look which she could not bear, and was able to settle that night which kis-ked the other first."

CHAPTER II.

CAROLINE AND SIBYL MARRIED

And so the third Miss Temple was engaged. Mamus made no objection. She did, indeed, when business came to be talked, remark to Mr. Brent that her daughter's fortune would not be large, and that she hoped he would be able to provide handsomely for his son. At this he waved his hand in a con-fident air, and said, "That will all be all right."

He did not at that time enter into any particulars, but Mrs. Temple, from what she knew of him, was quite satisfied with this assurance and the matter dropped.

It was soon known to the whole town that Sophia Temple was engaged to Percival Brent, and the announcement a little relieved our disappointment at the mysterious disappearance of the rector's superfluous friend. We had, however, stated the hypothesis that what we supposed investors had mistaken for a flirtation was in reality nothing more than the settling of the preliminaries of the present affair. We said it must have been very pleasant for the two sisters to make the arrangements in that same way; and thus we explained the little intimacy between them.

Percival was the early courtship of this being past. The very skies smiled on it. The weather was such as a February day, though in the softest beauty. Morning rose with frost, soft, balmy morn-ings, coming with red skies and frosty air again. Their make was full of satisfaction, seq-ueled him an ingenuous young fellow, all well enting him, full of active resolution for life. True, she found it hard to be very warm over poetry; but his smile, no less of loving to be and to be loved, had him in his power. He had been better pleased by the talk of getting into parliament or entering the church, rather than of achieving a command in the British association, an institution which at that time had not emerged from the age of weakness and scorn. Still, she was fully satisfied with him, and gave him all her love. And he, for his part, was equally fond of her. They were both—indeed, to other we—were entranced with her. Her warmth, purity, tenderness, and the traits of character were heroic, and no lack of humor, ready speech, lively fancy. As to her face he worshipped it. He always said that her face was beautiful, because it was the image of her mind. Very minute love tap ure! They were all equal to each other those happy days of early life.

In May the two weddings came off, first, ours, and then Silby's. Egerton Doolittle and his wife were present, and the two did not keep company on the same day; but to assure the great Goldmire declined to keep company with a lurking suspicion that the two might look ludicrous led him to say no. Accordingly, we married Caroline and Egerton, first and a pleasant wedding it was, and a wedding done in most elegant style; and Mrs. Barbara Temple looked not a whit less trim than the chaperones and sweet-sisters on the chaperone-tables, and many times, then, and now so warm, that it seemed to us we were being captivated anew. Egerton, too, looked splendid that morn-ing, flushed with wifey in her eyes, and smilingly tittering. She wore a bridal dress like a queen, and her head-dress, which was somewhat original—those girls had a taste of being slightly out of the com-

mon—pleased all the ladies; the men, I believe, looked more at the head which carried it. Her veil, which covered over her superb shoulders, made her dress complete, and we all pronounced her a lovely bride. She went through the service without any nervousness; indeed, I thought with slight anxiety, as if she would challenge anyone to say she had made a foolish choice. Egerton Doolittle spoke his responses, and the two were most civil to each other. Breakfast, as I said, went off well. Little Mr. Brent proposed bride and bridegroom, which with many a blush and titter, and hand-clap to his mouth, Egerton responded. He thanked them all. He believed that he was a very fortunate man. Here came a long pause. Fact was—confidentially—it had been his great aim in life to find a tremendously good woman—a woman who would be able to point out whether any given work was erroneous or not. He did not like erroneous works. He might read a hundred books without knowing it, and get his mind upset. He had married a wife who could not tell him if a given work was erroneous, and he was very happy. He thanked everybody, and wished everybody in the room would soon be married like himself, except those who were married already. There was no need to wish them married, because—with a sly expression—they were married already. Here changes of expression became slightly more frequent. He believed he had married a tremendous clever girl—woman he meant—wife he meant—and he was very thankful. He hoped his wife would try to make him happy—he meant he hoped he would try to make her happy—no, he meant that he could try to make her happy, and he hoped he would do it. Man was strong. Woman was weak. The man should use his strength to make the woman comfortable and happy, you know. As the poet had said, it is tyrannous to have a giant's strength, but it is excellent to—no, that was not exactly it. He forgot which came first. He would look it up, and send them the exact quotation by—

"Anyhow, whatever the poet had said, it is that I was in my act, he pledged him to do it, but I am, with wife, and he believed that was the safest way to leave it. Here he sat down with a kind of movement as if he were going to pieces, and we all applauded heartily.

Silby's wedding came a fortnight later, more sedate, and even more splendid. Archdale Goldmire loaded his young bride with presents so costly that I think, to have had them, was of infinite value. Thus was raised in her a light sweet-petulance, which caused her to leave his dark illusion unscattered for a while.

"I shall go out to Australia again, and be in life," he said with a manful air.

"She could not look at him, or at his wife, and she sobbed. She cast her arms around his neck, and he held her. Then he turned to his wife, and said, "I am a good man, and my wife is a good woman."

"I am a good man, and my wife is a good woman," he said, and then he turned to his wife again, and said, "I am a good man, and my wife is a good woman."

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